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## Common Core: Now It Gets Interesting

A few months back, I noted that the impressive early success of the Common Core effort risked breeding overconfidence, complacency, and inattention to how the effort would play out in practice. I warned that many who signed onto common assessments might be alienated by an effort that pushed too far or too fast.

Well, as of this morning, the Common Core battle has been officially joined. The notion that something this potentially momentous would unfold with no more than a bit of carping was always unlikely. Today, the anti-Common Core-ites fired their first organized response, in a manifesto titled, "Closing the Door on Innovation [[http://www.k12innovation.com/Manifesto/\\_V2\\_Home.html](http://www.k12innovation.com/Manifesto/_V2_Home.html)] ." Organized by the Hoover Institution's Bill Evers, Jay Greene of U. Arkansas and the Bush Institute, Greg Forster of the Foundation for Educational Choice, standards crusader Sandra Stotsky, and former Bush administration official Ze'ev Wurman, the document opposes "the ongoing effort by the U.S. Department of Education to have two federally funded testing consortia develop national curriculum guidelines, national curriculum models, national instructional materials, and national assessments using Common Core's national standards."

The 100+ mostly conservative signatories argued in a press release announcing the manifesto that "current U.S. Department of Education efforts to nationalize curriculum will stifle innovation and freeze into place an unacceptable status quo; end local and state control of schooling; lack a legitimate legal basis; and impose a one-size-fits-all model on America's students."

The signatories charge that current efforts "are against federal law and undermine the constitutional balance between national and state authority;" that "the evidence doesn't show a need for national curriculum or a national test for all students;" that the "U.S. Department of Education is basing its initiative on inadequate content standards;" that "there is no research-based consensus on what is the best curricular approach to each subject;" and that "there is not even consensus on whether a single 'best curricular approach' for all students exists."

(In a potentially related development, Whiteboard Advisors reported[<http://www.whiteboardadvisors.com/research/esea-reauthorization-state-play-2011>] on Friday that its April survey of influential D.C. "insiders" showed an 18 percent drop since July 2010 in how "important" the respondents think it is that a NCLB/ESEA reauthorization address the Common Core. Of the sixteen potential NCLB/ESEA elements addressed, Common Core showed the second largest decline. Common Core was the only issue for which "insiders" indicated there was less support in Congress now than in July 2010.)

Bill Evers reports that "Closing the Door" was underway before the Shanker Institute's recent manifesto [<http://www.ashankerinst.org/curriculum.html>] on behalf of "common content," but this document has clearly been shaped by what its authors term the Shanker Institute's effort to champion "a single nationalized curriculum in every K-12 subject." In short, the Finlandophile wing of the Common Core movement is accentuating the concerns of those who fear the exercise is a Trojan Horse for efforts to involve Washington more deeply in running the nation's schools. Signatories include legislators who chair or vice-chair of education committees in Minnesota, Colorado, Arizona, and Texas; state board members from Colorado and Alabama; two former general counsels at the U.S. Department of Ed; and a grab-bag of Republicans like former California governor Pete Wilson, former Reagan Attorney General Ed Meese, former U.S. House member Pete Hoekstra, anti-tax crusader Grover Norquist, and Spellings Commission chair Charles Miller. They also include William Estrada of the Home School Legal Defense Association; Bob Enlow, president of the Foundation for Educational Choice; the heads of a number of state-level conservative think tanks; and academics including Shelby Steele, U. Chicago's Richard Epstein, Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom, and, intriguingly, progressive icon Joel Spring.

It isn't yet clear whether this document marks the emergence of anything more than scattered opposition, but it does signal that the Common Core effort is about to become more contentious. For those who remember the national standards imbroglio of the early 1990s, the fact that this pushback is taking on a conservative, partisan shape, especially in the run-up to a Presidential election and at a time when small government Republicanism is back with a vengeance, should prompt some anxiety. The presence of some politically potent signers, like the home schoolers and Grover Norquist, only ups the ante.

I've previously raised questions about the Common Core not to be nettlesome but because, done right, the effort could be a terrific boon to assessment, accountability, research, tool-building, and instruction. Done wrong, it may well unravel what leading states have accomplished on standards, undercut charter schooling and autonomous district schools, stifle online learning, compromise school accountability, and fuel a more destructive replay of the '90s national standards fight. And, as I've said, I think it more likely that the enterprise will go wrong than that it'll go right. This leaves me pretty conflicted, and agnostic, on the whole deal.

The challenge for Common Core-ites was never to win over Evers or Greene. They're smart skeptics more attuned to the risks than the potential benefits of the effort. The challenge for Common Core-ites has always been to convince the mass of policymakers, activists, educators, and observers that the concerns are overblown. Core-ites need to hold centrist policymakers, reformers, and voters by assuring them that there are no hidden agendas, the effort is working to

anticipate and address adverse consequences, and the Common Core is not morphing into a covert national curriculum or a dramatic expansion of the federal role.

Over the past twelve months, I'd say that Core-ites have done a mediocre job on these counts. Rather, they seem to have blithely accepted (or welcomed) an active federal role, largely ignored how their efforts might impact charter schooling or online learning, dismissed skeptics as ideologues and know-nothings, and done nothing to rein in those eager to charge from common assessments to something like a national curriculum. Common Core-ites would do well to regard today's blast not as a threat but as an opportunity to raise their game.

Posted by Rick Hess at 7:59 AM |